



PROM & GRADUATION SEASON



What is it about a prom or graduation that makes rational parents go bonkers?

As we move into the prom and graduation season, many parents and school officials worry about the safety of their children. A Google search under the term "Safe Prom" turned up hundreds of sites that focus on encouraging students to make safe and healthy choices. There were schools conducting pre-prom events showing the dangers of drinking and driving and many web sites promoting limos and clothing. However, there were few if any sites encouraging or guiding parents to take the lead role in creating a safe prom night.

For the past ten years, I've worked as a prevention specialist in independent and public schools educating principals, headmasters, parents, and students about the dangers of underage drinking and other drug use. When conversation turns to a horror story about prom night or graduation party disasters, in many cases, it is a parent who has either rented a hotel room with little or no supervision or purchased the alcohol consumed.

A 2002 study revealed that 40% of teen traffic fatalities during the prom and graduation weekends were alcohol-related. Fatal car accidents, injuries, and assaults are not an adolescent rite of passage for any child. Underage drinking is a major factor in the two leading causes of teenage deaths: car crashes and fatal injuries. Underage high-risk drinking is also linked to two-thirds of sexual assaults and date rapes of teens, and increases the likelihood of unsafe and unplanned sexual activity. According to the American College of Preventive Medicine, approximately 75% of adolescent morbidity and mortality is associated with behavioral health risks, of which a large portion can be attributed to alcohol and other drug use.

Under the new social host law, many states are prosecuting parents who serve alcohol to minors. Ohio has a program called "Parents Who Host Lose the Most." Here in Massachusetts, not a month goes by without a courtroom appearance by a parent for serving alcohol to a minor. Schools, law enforcement, and parent associations need to reach out to parents and educate them about the legal and financial risks of serving alcohol to minors and renting hotel rooms to minors under their name during the upcoming prom and graduation season.

The prom and graduation are celebrations full of expectation. Each is a meaningful milestone for students and should be celebrated with friends and family. Many students who would normally not drink or engage in sexual behavior are tempted and under more pressure than any other time of the year. Parents need to set appropriate expectations and continue to enforce household rules about drinking and curfews. If parents do their job, the only horror should be when your children look back years from now and say, "Oh my, what was I wearing?"

Recommendations for Parents

Do not extend curfews — Teen car crashes and deaths increase exponentially late at night. If you extend curfews, do not give large blocks of unaccounted for time. Know where your children are, how long they will be there, when will they be leaving, who is there, and who is supervising the event.

Do not rent a hotel room — Is anyone really surprised when a tragedy happens after a parent rents a hotel room unsupervised? The parent must be there, not out to dinner with friends or on another floor asleep.

Be up when they come home — My mother once told me that her prevention plan was coffee and lights — be wide awake with the lights on sitting at the kitchen table, coffee in hand, when they come in the front door. A teen's curfew should never exceed the parents' ability to stay up.

Initiate a dialogue about your expectations — Although you may feel you've communicated your desires and consequence for unwanted behaviors many times, the prom and graduation season is a great time to remind your children. Teens who normally would pass on drinking, drug use, or sexual behavior are tempted in ways they are usually not during the rest of the year. Talk to them about drinking and driving, getting in the car with drunk drivers, and what they can do if something goes unexpectedly wrong. Consider role-playing a few scenarios. Research points to parents who discuss possible scenarios in great detail and seek their teens' knowledge about what to do increase the chances of their teen actually doing what they suggest.

Keep the party local — Don't be tempted to allow your children to celebrate at a beach or other remote location. Allowing your teen to take off to a remote location with little supervision creates unnecessary risk.



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